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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001860

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: OPTIONS FOR THE PRESIDENCY

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: March 14's Muslim leaders, convinced that international support (i.e., pressure on Syria) is not sufficient to guarantee the election and survival of a March 14 president, are now bent on pursuing an option that, until a few weeks ago, was an anathema to them: LAF Commander Michel Sleiman as president. Not only is this a potential Syrian/Hizballah trap, but it seriously risks splitting March 14 - and perhaps even the Siniora cabinet -- once and for all. But without strong international support they can unite behind in using a "half-plus-one" parliamentary vote, the March 14 presidency (that the French initiative, too, was about to trade away) is about to be lost. If we cannot persuade March 14 leaders that they stick with one of their own candidates, we will work with them, first, so that they stay united and, second, to make sure that they get the best possible package of assurances from Sleiman. End summary.

¶2. (S) We are still scratching our heads over the astonishing about-face by March 14 Muslims regarding LAF Commander Michel Sleiman's suitability as president: until very recently, Sleiman, while never considered a shameless Syrian stooge in the model of the odious Emile Lahoud, was widely viewed as Syria's preferred president. Now, Walid Jumblatt, Saad Hariri, and even Fouad Siniora (who never masked his personal distaste for Sleiman) have joined in advocating Sleiman as the "least bad" presidential candidate with any chance of success. Based on what their ambassadors say, Egypt and Saudi Arabia seem solidly behind Sleiman. France, according to French Charge Parant says, accepts him, as does (or so we hear) Maronite Patriarch Sfeir. We expect the other Europeans and UN, happy for any solution, will quickly follow. Hariri, Siniora, and Jumblatt -- fearful of Michel Aoun's populist exploitation of the presidency vacuum at their expense -- want Sleiman elected by Friday, November ¶30.

¶3. (S) Via reftel and other septels, we outline the arguments Hariri, Jumblatt, and Siniora make in favor of Sleiman. We summarize them as follows: First, backing Sleiman will (arguably) align the LAF with March 14. Second, Sleiman, more than anyone else, can shrink Michel Aoun to size (with half of Aoun's bloc ready to bolt for Sleiman). Third, Sleiman, decent and honest, is preferable to other

fall-backs like Michel Edde or Riad Salameh. Fourth, Sleiman is willing to give guarantees about March 14 principles. Fifth, amending the constitution to elect Sleiman will corner Nabih Berri and other March 8 figures, who would have to accept a cabinet decree (and thus, retroactively, recognize the legitimacy of all other Siniora cabinet decisions). Sixth, if -- as is now argued -- the pro-Syrians wanted a presidential vacancy all along, a Sleiman candidacy will expose their true intentions, when pro-Syrian MPs fail to help pass the constitutional amendment (requiring a two-third affirmative vote). Seventh, if March 8 MPs balk at electing Sleiman, then a "half-plus-one" absolute majority election becomes easier to pull off (and with the LAF on March 14's side). Finally, electing Sleiman would avoid violence, chaos, and an erosion of March 14 power and popularity.

¶4. (S) As we have told those now favoring Sleiman, we have three major reservations. First, given that we agreed with the same people now advocating him that Sleiman was Syria's primary candidate, we do not know how to evaluate whether March 14 -- instead of outsmarting Syria -- is instead falling into a clever trap and becoming the tool that brings Syria's man to power. Second, while Sleiman's actions (Nahr al-Barid fight, protection of March 14 demonstrators, deployment of the LAF to the south) have been far better than his public speeches (which, until very recently, were filled with "protection of the resistance" language), we need to know what assurances Sleiman would give and how March 14 would enforce them once he is in office. Third, March 14's Muslim leaders have done little to convince March 14 Christians. Samir Geagea, for example, told us separately that he is adamantly against Sleiman. If there is no March 14 unity behind this proposal and if Syria and Hizballah can plausibly claim victory with Sleiman, then Hariri, Jumblatt, and Siniora cannot expect us to favor this approach. March 14 and even the cabinet could very easily split along

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Muslim-Christian lines, if Hariri pushes too quickly for a vote on Sleiman before getting his allies on board.

¶5. (S) We are emphasizing to all of our March 14 and GOL contacts that March 14 unity must remain an essential goal, not only for the presidency but for the difficult weeks of forming a cabinet. March 14 unity remains strong behind three presidential candidates on Patriarch Sfeir's list -- Nassib Lahoud, Boutros Harb, and Michel Khoury -- and also behind a fourth candidate, Charles Rizk, who is not on the Patriarch's list. Hariri, Jumblatt, and Siniora all agree with Geagea and other March 14 Christians that electing Nassib Lahoud is far preferable than moving toward a Michel Sleiman presidency. But March 14 leaders split as to whether they can actually pull off electing and then protecting a March 14 president.

¶6. (S) Hariri, Jumblatt, and Siniora have concluded that, in light of the French flirtation with Damascus and the Syrian participation at Annapolis, there is insufficient pressure on the Syrians to risk trying for a "half-plus-one" election of Nassib Lahoud. With virtually all international players except the United States emphasizing the need for consensus, they claim to be seeking the best fall-back deal possible that avoids violence. In justifying their consideration of Sleiman, they cite the Patriarch's opposition to half-plus-one and the French failure to get a parliamentary fall-back to their failed initiative. Geagea, on the other hand, believes that the fears of outright confrontation in the case of a half-plus-one election are exaggerated, given previous threats (including, *inter alia*, directed against Chapter VII approval of the Special Tribunal) that never materialized into action.

¶7. (S) No one in March 14 seems willing to tolerate the current vacuum for more than a couple of weeks, given the fear of how much popularity Aoun could gain from it. The bottom line, in our view, is that we are facing, imminently,

a push from within the larger part of the March 14 movement for a Michel Sleiman presidency, something that March 14 and GOL leaders vowed only a few weeks ago to oppose. So far, Hariri, Jumblatt, and Siniora are taking seriously the need to keep March 14 united, but we suspect that they will be seeking ways (including Saudi financial subsidies) to buy Geagea's support for this less-than-idea solution. We agree that Sleiman, an improvement over Emile Lahoud, would probably be easier to deal with in Baabda Palace than, say, Michel Edde, and he would certainly demolish Aoun's political and military base one and for all.

¶8. (S) But if we are interested in getting March 14 leaders, per Geagea's wishes, to stay united beyond their own candidates, and to get one of those candidates elected, we need to let the March 14 leaders know what we are doing internationally to support a half-plus-one vote -- or, to be less confrontational in the language, to support the idea that the parliamentary majority should have the right to elect the president of its choice. Otherwise, we are about to lose the March 14 presidency and, perhaps, March 14 unity in the process.

¶9. (S) We have asked March 14 over the past few days to concentrate on March 14 unity and to be pro-active, rather than reactive. March 14 is indeed solidly united behind its own candidates (Lahoud and Harb), as well as Khoury and Rizk.

But that unity is going to be sorely tested as the leaders consider whether to stay with their own candidates, with the risk of continued vacuum or violence, or -- proactively -- go for a fall-back like Sleiman. We will work closely with our contacts in the coming days to keep the leaders united and, if they decide to go for Sleiman, to get the best package of assurances possible from him in return for their support. If we want them to stick with March 14 candidates and a parliamentary half-plus-one vote, we will need to do lots of work in other capitals -- Paris, Cairo, Riyadh, the Vatican, inter alia -- to reverse what seems to be a strong international and regional desire for a compromise president.

FELTMAN